DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 357 SO 020 503

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TITLE Youth Leadership. Insights into Issues in Education.
INSTITUTION Stanley Foundation, Muscatine, Iowa.
PUB DATE Jan 88
NOTE 17p.; Summary of a conference cosponsored by the Stanley Foundation and Las Palomas de Taos (Taos, NM, January 29-31, 1988). For related documents, see SO 020 504-505.
AVAILABLE FROM Stanley Foundation, 420 E. Third St., Muscatine, IA 52761 (single copies free).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Agents; Citizen Participation; *Community Leaders; Conferences; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership Training; *Public Service; Social Responsibility; Volunteers; *Youth Leaders

ABSTRACT

Educators from around the United States convened for a conference focusing on youth leadership. Participants included classroom teachers, independent education consultants, school administrators, individuals affiliated with universities, and educators affiliated with such institutions as the YMCA, the YWCA, exchange programs, and museums. Two ideas emerged as central to the discussion: (1) the distinction between youth leadership and student leadership, and (2) the understanding of leadership as service performed in the context of a community. Student leadership usually refers to activities that students undertake within their schools or as token representatives of students elsewhere. Youth leadership presumes that young people can engage in effective behavior and exercise thoughtful influence on the course of human events. Leadership was generally seen as intentional action that influenced the course of events. Most of the participants wanted young people to develop leadership skills that would serve the welfare of their community and the world. Other issues and ideas that were discussed include: (1) vision, (2) world-view, (3) heroes, (4) personal responsibility, (5) student control, (6) risk taking, (7) process, (8) power, (9) systems, (10) competition, (11) reinforcement, (12) maintaining childhood, (13) skills, (14) obstacles, (15) money, and (16) fellowship. A list of participants and information about the sponsoring agencies concludes the document. (JB)

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Issues in Education:

Youth Leadership

In this conference summary we endeavor to share a number of the valuable insights that emerged from the discussion of youth leadership. This report is not intended as a statement of consensus since there may be numerous views and interpretations mentioned here that were not shared by all who were present.

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Insights into
Issues in Education:

Youth Leadership

A conference cosponsored by
The Stanley Foundation
and
Las Palomas de Taos

January 29-31, 1988
Taos, New Mexico

A weekend conversation among educators from around the nation produced many thought-provoking insights about youth leadership. Participants included classroom teachers, independent education consultants, school administrators, individuals affiliated with universities, and educators affiliated with such institutions as Ys, exchange programs, and museums. All came to this event because they were currently engaged in or were contemplating the development of youth leadership programs.

Two ideas finally emerged as central to all the discussion — the distinction between youth leadership and student leadership and the understanding of leadership as service performed in the context of a community. Because of their singular significance, we discuss these ideas first.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

There is a profound difference between the concept of youth leadership and that of student leadership. Today student leadership usually refers to the activities that students undertake within their schools or as token representatives of students elsewhere. The recent Supreme Court decision regarding students' right to free speech clearly illustrates that student leadership is not really seen as any attempt to engage students in the exercise of power or influence.

To speak of youth leadership, which was the purpose of the conference, is to make an intentional distinction. Youth leadership presumes that young people can engage in effective behavior and exercise thoughtful influence on the course of human events. Youth leadership is intended to be real, to be effective, and to have consequences.

LEADERSHIP AS SERVICE IN COMMUNITY

While no single definition was developed, leadership was generally seen as intentional action that influences the course of events. As one participant said, "I choose to exercise leadership when I discover that I want something badly enough to go and get it myself." The group was largely in agreement that these influences should be for the common good as well as for the welfare of the individual leader. This kind of leadership is service as well as leadership and honors the tradition of the servant leader. And it quickly became clear that most of the participants wanted young people to develop leadership skills that would serve the welfare of their community and the world. While leadership development can also mean building the skills needed to exercise control and power without concern for the community, such an undertaking was seen as destructive to human welfare and growth.

Community — Community was generally seen as a grouping of people who share a common set of values and norms and who actively care for the welfare and survival of the group. Since this usage could include groups as disparate as the Quakers and the

Klu Klux Klan, we made a further distinction between authentic and inauthentic community.

Authentic Community — Authentic community is a community whose values and survival are consistent with the best interests of the larger global community. An authentic community seeks an existence which does not occur at the expense of other inhabitants of the planet.

The Community-Impaired Society — Our conversations about community led us to realize that many young people in this nation have no experience of community in their families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, or towns. As one participant observed, "ours is a community-impaired society."

Teaching Community — The educational challenge implicit in the above-mentioned fact is that if we want to develop community leaders, we often must first teach people to recognize and function in community. Participants seemed to generally believe that you learn to be in community by experiencing yourself as part of a community, examining the value of such an experience, and choosing to seek such relationships for your own life.

Within the discussion of the central concepts, numerous other issues and ideas were raised and discussed:

1. VISION

Ideally, leadership should be informed by vision, in general terms a vision of the common good and specifically a vision of one's

personal leadership project and work. There was much discussion of the role of the educator in helping young people develop their vision. Are young people naturally moved by the vision of hope? Should educators try to pass on their personal visions, or should they only help young people build their own? Can a teacher avoid sharing his or her vision?

2. WORLD-VIEW

The discussion of vision also raised the need to help youth thoughtfully develop a world-view (an understanding of the nature of the planet and its inhabitants), because a vision influenced by an unacknowledged or unexamined world-view can be dangerous.

3. HEROES

We explored the idea of heroes as influences in young people's lives. While adult participants seemed to believe that young people have few heroes today, the young people themselves reported in one session that they do. It seemed to us significant that most of the heroes they identified were not famous but were people of personal significance.

4. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

It seemed clear to us that leadership could only be exercised out of a sense of personal responsibility. Helping young people build confidence in their ability to act in their own behalf and the courage to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions is a central educational issue.

5. STUDENT CONTROL

The need to help young people develop a sense of personal responsibility led us to

emphasize the need for students to have significant control of the course and process of their learning experiences. They must have the sense that the activities which are occurring are to a large extent the consequence of their choices and contributions. Most of us agreed that current education is woefully lacking in opportunities for students to control their own experiences.

6. RISK TAKING

Young people also need to have a wide range of opportunities to take risks, to find that they can survive the consequences of such risk taking whether it be success or failure. Such opportunities help build the confidence which supports responsible behavior. There are many kinds of risks. For one person a physical endeavor is risky; for another, a social encounter; for another, a public appearance. Young people need to find safe places to practice taking risks.

7. PROCESS

The process of education is itself a crucial factor in developing leadership. To engage people actively and interactively in any undertaking is to help them develop their leadership skills. Discussion is more engaging than lecture. You learn more about ecology by planting trees than by drawing pictures of the water cycle.

8. POWER

To build both a sense of community and of personal responsibility, people need to learn to exercise power and to share it. The crucial question that emerged was: how do we help young people develop the power to

deal with power? Power in the first sense is personal and is manifest in the courage to initiate action with the intent to lead. Power in the second sense is established and devoted to maintaining itself against changes that might diminish or displace it.

9. SYSTEMS

In dealing with questions of power and responsibility, students need to be equipped with an understanding of political and social systems and how they work.

10. COMPETITION

To the extent that competition reinforces such values as dominance/subordinance, noncooperation, and passivity, it was seen as a counterproductive educational strategy.

11. REINFORCEMENT

Repeatedly we mentioned the need for students to be supported and reinforced in their efforts to grow as leaders. The importance of life-changing events was acknowledged, but everyone agreed that such events could only occur for youth who were prepared to experience them, and they would likely only have a lasting effect for youngsters who had some continuing support structure in their lives.

12. MAINTAINING CHILDHOOD

A significant concern that both youths and adults raised was the danger of robbing young people of their childhoods in an overzealous effort to develop responsible leaders. After hearing the students, one adult offered the insight that a mature young person is a "together" child, not a miniature adult.

13. SKILLS

Throughout our conversations we discussed the fact that while there is more to worthwhile leadership than the mere collection of skills, there is nevertheless a body of skills that young people should be encouraged to develop if they aspire to leadership. These skills include the ability to act, initiate, cooperate, follow-through, evaluate, share, communicate, organize, plan, facilitate, and also to be product-oriented and able to develop and act on one's vision.

14. OBSTACLES

Several significant obstacles to developing youth leadership were identified. First, our current educational and social system often discourages youth leadership so that many potential leaders are either outsiders and hard to locate within the systems or inside and passive or even exercising negative leadership. Second, the control needs of adults often lead them to block youth leadership efforts or to desert young people as soon as they begin to exercise responsibility. Third, youth leadership efforts often go ignored or unacknowledged by adults who discount the young people as mere children, and, therefore, of no importance. And finally, lack of funding and public commitment to youth could not be overlooked.

15. MONEY

We acknowledged the importance of efforts to fund youth leadership development. As one participant noted, the need for funds should never drive our work; however, significant funding must be continually and energetically pursued.

16. FOLLOWERSHIP

A discussion of leadership in community also becomes an examination of "followership." How do we choose to follow what we follow? In community, under what conditions do we defer? What is the interplay of the role of leader and follower? How and when do we choose to commit, to act, or to trust?

CONCLUSION

It is obvious from this report that the discussion often raised as many questions as it answered. Two questions were particularly outstanding as the conversation concluded:

1. What is the core set of shared values necessary to the life of an authentic community?

2. How can youth become coleaders with us in our efforts to change schooling?

Because of these questions and because we were intrigued to learn of a study of ethical leaders who all reported to have been deeply influenced by an ethical mentor, plans are currently underway to continue consideration of these questions in a follow-up conference that explores the role of mentor in the development of youth leadership.

APPENDIX

Two activities that proved useful to our discussion:

1. On the first evening everyone spent ten to fifteen quiet minutes writing responses to two questions.
   - What do you remember about being fifteen — your school, your home, your friends, your life?
   - What happened that first made you aware of the world's impact on your life?

2. On the second evening eleven young people, ages 12 to 17, agreed to be part of a fishbowl activity. They sat in a circle in the center of the group of adults. Two adults whom the young people knew well sat with them. The adults handed to the inner circle written questions which the young people answered. The adults were asked to refrain from commenting and to focus on listening to what the young people had to say.

PARTICIPANTS

That there is a wealth of good, mutually enhancing work going on was vividly clear in the exchange of ideas that occurred during the conference. Nearly everyone on the participant list has materials and advice to offer to those who wish to inquire.

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THE STANLEY FOUNDATION

The Stanley Foundation works toward the goal of a secure peace with freedom and justice. Programs are planned, administered, and funded by the foundation, and all are focused on foreign relations and international education.

The foundation fosters involvement in world affairs through several different avenues, one of which is an extensive educator support program. Building on nearly twenty years of experience in the Muscatine, Iowa, schools, educator support now involves students and educators nationwide and concentrates on global themes through summer workshops, conferences, teaching aids, and program consultation.

LAS PALOMAS DE TAOS

Las Palomas de Taos, a nonprofit educational organization, is centered in the historic Mabel Dodge Luhan house in Taos, New Mexico. This colorful setting at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo mountains hosts a tri-cultural community, providing visitors with unique living and learning experiences.

As an educational center Las Palomas sponsors a number of diverse learning opportunities, including workshops for educators, art experiences, elderhostels, youth adventure programs, seminars about the Southwest, and retreats. Las Palomas programs help people create positive ways of living with and valuing diversity and change.

COLLABORATED EFFORTS

The Stanley Foundation and Las Palomas de Taos frequently collaborate in their global education endeavors. Jan Drum of the Stanley Foundation and George Otero from Las Palomas codirect programming for youth and adults and write a twice-a-month teaching aid called *Teachable Moments* which addresses global themes.

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